

Russia's “soft annexation” of Belarus during its invasion of Ukraine

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As a side-line to its unprecedented military build-up on the land borders of Ukraine and the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February, Russia has for all intents and purposes also taken control of Belarus militarily. On 10–20 February, Russia and Belarus held a joint military exercise, Allied Resolve-2022, in areas close to the Belarusian border with Ukraine. The close proximity of the Ukrainian capital, Kyiv, to the Belarusian border immediately raised fears that Russia was considering an attack on Ukraine from Belarusian territory. These fears were exacerbated when it became clear that the Russian military units involved in the exercise would not be leaving Belarus at its conclusion, and eventually realized when Russian troops began the invasion of Ukraine early in the morning on 24 February.

Belarus and Russia have for more than 20 years been engaged in a so-called Union State, focused on economic and military integration. Having stalled for many years due to Belarus resistance to giving up even more of its sovereignty, this integration process acquired new momentum after fraudulent elections led to mass protests in the Belarusian crisis of 2020. The Belarusian regime brutally crushed these protests with the financial, political and moral support of Russia. Since then, the leader of Belarus, Aleksandr Lukashenko, has been heavily indebted to Russia and made several pledges of loyalty to the Russian leader.

In these turbulent times, on 27 February 2022 Belarus will hold a referendum on amendments to its constitution, also as a result of Russian demands. Although the proposed amendments limit the terms of the president's power to two, they also give Lukashenko several options how to stay in power extensively.

The Allied Resolve-2022 joint military exercise

Military integration has always been Russia's top priority in the Union State integration process. Russia's aim is to upgrade the military potential of the Belarusian Armed Forces to the standards and operational needs of Russian Armed Forces in its Western strategic orientation. A further objective is to have more Russian military assets forward deployed in Belarus and Kaliningrad. These territories are separated only by the Suwalki Corridor – a narrow stretch of land between the Polish and Lithuanian borders. In any potential military conflict between Russia and NATO, this is believed to be the most vulnerable area on NATO's Eastern flank.

For decades, the Union State has had two joint military components: a Regional Group of Forces (RGF) and a Unified Regional Air Defence System (URADS). The RGF consists of all the ground

forces and special operations units of the Belarusian Armed Forces and the 1st Guards Tank Army of Russia's Western Military District. Russia also has two military installations in Belarus – an early warning radar station and a naval communications centre – but no military base in the country. The military integration process intensified following the 2020 Belarusian crisis. The Russian military presence increased with a greater regularity of joint military drills, the opening of three joint combat training centres – one of which is in Belarus, focused on air defence – and increased deliveries of Russian arms to Belarus.¹

The active phase of the Allied Resolve 2022 joint operational exercise was held on five training grounds in Belarus close to the borders of Poland and Ukraine on 10–20 February 2022. According to official reports from the Russian and Belarusian defence ministries, the total number of participants and the number of major weapon systems did not exceed the parameters defined in the 2011 OSCE Vienna Document. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, however, estimated that the exercise involved around 30,000 participants, almost three times the 13,000 limit before foreign observers should be invited to observe the exercise according to the Vienna Document.

In fact, Allied Resolve-2022 was extraordinary in several ways, most notably for the major participation of Russian forces from the Eastern Military District rather than the Western Military District, in the vicinity of Belarus and Ukraine. The timing was also unusual – a joint operational exercise in the Western strategic direction conducted in winter so soon after the September Zapad-2021 (West) strategic exercise. Moreover, it took place in the same year as the planned Vostok-2022 (East) strategic exercise, which is likely to involve troops from the Eastern Military District.

Furthermore, Allied Resolve-2022 was part of a series of exercises conducted in parallel by the Russian Armed Forces deployed around Ukraine; in the Atlantic, Pacific and Arctic Oceans, and the Mediterranean Sea; and in the Grom-2022 strategic nuclear exercise. Putin and Lukashenko jointly oversaw the nuclear exercise on big screens in what was described by the Kremlin as a “situation centre”.

Linked to this series of exercises was the release of a new military doctrine for the Union State.² The document had been signed by the two presidents on 4 November 2021 but was released just prior to the exercises. Unlike the previous Union State military doctrine of 2001, the new document explicitly designates the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) the primary threat to the Union State's security (Chapter 2.7). It also sheds some light on the use of the RGF, deployment of which would be carried out during the period of growing military threat (period of direct threat of aggression) (Chapter 1).

Changes in Belarusian policy doctrine

In addition to fulfilling Russia's aims for the Belarusian Armed Forces, Lukashenko is also pursuing his own goals. First, military cooperation with Russia increases Belarus' political weight, as neighbouring countries such as Ukraine, Poland, Lithuania and Latvia are now all concerned about the use of Belarus territory in the current Russian invasion of Ukraine, and potential incursions further West. Second, Lukashenko is demonstrating his loyalty to Russia in the hope of maintaining

¹ Hedenskog, Jakob (2020) *Endgame Belarus: Union State Integration Under Pressure*. FOI: Stockholm.

² Union State Military Doctrine, at <https://postkomsg.com/>

continued support for his regime, which is held together by repression. Russia has found Lukashenko useful in its conflict with the West, for instance in orchestrating the migrant crisis on the Belarusian border with Poland and Lithuania in the autumn of 2021.

The intensification of military integration has been accompanied by a change in Belarusian foreign policy doctrine. Lukashenko's increased dependence on Russia, due to his isolation and sanctions by the West since the 2020 Belarusian crisis, has forced him to make symbolic concessions. On 30 November 2021, in an interview with a Russian television channel, he declared that "Crimea is *de facto* Russian and after the referendum, Crimea became *de jure* Russian". Previously, Lukashenko had refused to accept Russia's annexation of Crimea. On 29 November 2021, Lukashenko said that Belarus would not "stand aside" in the case of war in Donbas or on the border with Russia. Before Russia's formal recognition of the two "People's Republics" of Donetsk and Luhansk on 22 February, however, Lukashenko's line was that any decision on recognition would be taken in consultation with Russia.

Also, in the November 2021 interview, Lukashenko stated that if NATO transferred nuclear weapons to Poland, he would suggest that Putin return nuclear weapons to Belarus. The new Union State military doctrine explicitly states that Russian nuclear weapons will remain an important factor in preventing an outbreak of nuclear military conflict or military conflict using conventional weapons (Chapter 2.22). Although the military doctrine provides no legal foundation for the future deployment of Russian nuclear weapons in Belarus, the rhetorical change was fundamental 25 years after Belarus completed the transfer of Soviet-era nuclear weapons to Russia in 1996.

Referendum on the amended constitution

Following the Belarusian crisis of 2020, Russia increased its pressure on Lukashenko to amend the Belarusian constitution with the aim of limiting presidential powers in favour of a stronger parliament. On 21 December 2021, the proposed amendments to the constitution were published and submitted for public comment, paving the way for "approval in a national referendum". The changes do not particularly weaken presidential power, however, as envisaged at the start, but rather the opposite.

On the surface, the draft constitution envisages a major reorganisation of the system of government in Belarus. The All-Belarusian People's Assembly, which so far has been convened every five or six years in the form a large congress of delegates from all over the country, will be granted the status of a constitutional body and up to 1,200 members will be elected for a five-year term. The Assembly will gain extensive competences at the expense of the current prerogatives of the president and the executive. Chaired by a permanently operating presidium, which may be chaired the incumbent president, it will become a body of executive power, whose recommendations and decisions will be carried out by the parliament, the head of state and the government.³ The Assembly will also have an extensive appointing authority.

The amended constitution provides several alternative avenues for Lukashenko to continue to rule Belarus for an extensive period, maybe for the rest of his life. He can either stay as president or become the chairman of the Assembly, or he will hold both positions. According to the amended

³ Zochowski, Piotr (2022) "Transformation of Lukashenka's system of government: the draft of Belarus's new constitution", 21 January. OSW: Warsaw.

constitution, no decision on his future will be required until 2035, which gives him considerable flexibility. The amended constitution also envisages guarantees on immunity from prosecution for Lukashenko. The so-called “Kazakhi scenario”, in which the president hands over formal power to a chosen successor but remains in charge behind the scenes, has probably lost some of its attraction after the turbulence in Kazakhstan in January 2022.

There are also important changes to the country’s security policy in the amended constitution, such as the removal of all references to Belarus as a state free of nuclear weapons and Belarus as a neutral state – both likely gestures to the Kremlin. By contrast, the new version of the constitution emphasises that Belarus rules out military aggression against other countries. However, this strongly contradicts its actions in the build-up to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

Fundamentally, the amendments to the basic law are more than anything else a propaganda move to create the impression of democratising an authoritarian system. The unprecedented repression in the country since the rigged presidential elections of August 2020 makes nationwide protests or boycotts of the referendum highly unlikely. In principle, all the leading opposition figures are either in jail or have fled abroad.

The Russian military take-over of Belarus, practically, and use of its territory for Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, as well as involvement of Lukashenko in the Kremlin’s political project both externally and internally, including the process of amending the constitution, are all signs that the Kremlin has achieved its strategic goal of “soft annexation” of Belarus.